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The Gazette
ENTERTAINMENT
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Return of urban tales for adults

Puppets tell stories

PAT DONNELLY
Gazette Theatre Critic

When Santa Claus rules the malls and The Nutcracker beckons, live theatre for adults drops off the map.

That's where the storytelling tradition of Contes Urbaines 2000: Hard Core, Hard Coeur comes in.

And now, Kobol Marionnettes is also moving into the pre-holiday vacuum with Divertissements Nocturnes Pour Marionnettes Consentantes, a puppet show for grownups.

Contes Urbaines, a cabaret featuring urban Christmas tales written by Quebec playwrights and performed by local stars, began at Lisorre in 1994. Last year, after a one-year hiatus, it returned to La Licorne with a new pan-Canadian twist: the stories were written by francophone playwrights from across the country.

This year, the pen is back in the hand of Yvan Bienvenue, who originated the idea. And all the stories have a Montreal base as well as a Christmas twist. They range from the reflections of a mother with a mentally handicapped son, performed by Louison Danis, to the angst of a sterile couple, delivered by Roger Léger. Bienvenue himself performs a homeless person's view of the holiday season.

Contes Urbaines brings out the thespian in those who normally remain behind the scenes. The director, Fernand Rainville, does double duty, taking to the stage with a midnight-mass story that includes a recounting of the sins of the church. And theatre-critic-turned-director Paul Lefèvre delivers the final monologue of the evening, about death. He's modest about his contribution. "It only requires minimal acting skills," Lefèvre said, "because the story was tailor-made for me."

Why is Contes Urbaines so popular?

"We like storytelling," Lefèvre replied. "When we get drunk, we sing folk songs and tell stories. It's the martinis side of Quebec."

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Eko: Divertissements Nocturnes Pour Marionnettes Consentantes taps a similar vein. Like Contes Urbaines, it's essentially storytelling for adults – only the characters are puppets.

Kobol Marionnettes was founded in 1986, by Pier Dufour and Louis Ayotte, two veterans of Montreal's internationally renowned Théâtre Sans Fil. But the current run of Eko at Théâtre d'Aujourd'Hui marks the company's official launch.

"We have lots of experience," said Dufour, who traveled the world with Théâtre Sans Fil for 15 years, including a stint at the New Victory theatre on Broadway. "And we know what we want to do."

Dropping the hoods and masks that keep Sans Fil manipulators anonymous was Step 1. Now, like Ronnie Burkett, whom Dufour considers a "master" of the art, they show their faces and even step into the action.

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COURTESY OF KOBOL MARIONNETTES
Puppet Le Punky tells tales of drugs and heartbreak in show at Théâtre d'Aujourd'Hui.

FROM GAZETTE FILES
The mop-top quartet during the throes of Beatlemania in 1964 (from left): John Lennon, Ringo Starr, George Harrison and Paul McCartney.

Fab Four were no mere fad

A Hard Day's Night, made more than 35 years ago and now in re-release, still holds up, just like the Beatles. A bumpy, 36-hour romp, it was the precursor to the music video.

The Beatles movie A Hard Day's Night opens in Montreal tomorrow; more than 35 years after the Richard Lester-directed film opened in Montreal in August 1964. On the eve of its reissue, artist Juan Rodriguez muses on the movie and the revival of interest in the Beatles.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
Special to The Gazette

A Hard Day's Night was made on the run, propelled by the vortex of Beatlemania. It fulfills its aim as a faux documentary – 36 hours in the life – by capturing the moment and transcending it, reflecting the same dynamic that anchored John, Paul, George and Ringo in the midst of their hurricane.

On the other hand, the coffee-table book The Beatles Anthology, released in October, is so larded with a self-important sense of history that it virtually solicits a reverential response – the antithesis of Hard Day's Night. Sacrifices fact (and leaves out their sexual exploits) for pumped-up "legacy" that only serves the baby-boomers' refusal to go beyond their time. (Ah, nostalgia is heady stuff when it smells like decomposing teen spirit.)

The film gleefully tackles the contradictions between commerce and art, product and meaning – with a wink at "art" (and a nudge to teeny-boppers). While the modus operandi was concocted by director Richard Lester – an American living in Britain who worked with the quintessentially absurdist British comics Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan – the feeling remains that the Beatles created this modern classic.

"They have made a film, not an illustrated jukebox," wrote the Saturday Review's Arthur Knight, a skeptic for whom the movie was his first glimpse of the Fab Four. Indeed, just as the boys win over the film's doltish authority figures (TV director Victor Spinetti and granddad Wilfred Brambell), they're hellbent on flirting with avant-gardists. The movie is a novelle-vague musical, echoing the revolutionary narrative style of Jean-Luc Godard's Breathless (made a mere five years earlier).

Of course, A Hard Day's Night was the precursor to music video, both an image-builder and a come-on to buy the soundtrack. But the Beatles insisted on making the film different from the run-of-the-mill rock'n'roll vehicle (Elvis crap, beach movies), as different as they were.

The dazzling near-blinding white light of a studio scene is a telling commentary of the nakedness of their celebrity. Self-effacing as they purported to be, they knew they were no mere fad but a gargantuan sociocultural phenomenon. The sheer impact of their arrival in North America in 1964 is not likely to be replicated – Beatlemania was when the straight-laced, phony-dream conformist 1950s were officially certified as over. Yeah, yeah, yeah!

The singular genius of this movie is that the Beatles look at themselves objectively and cannily as a phenomenon, while being caught up in it. ("How did you find America?" they're asked. "Turn left at Greenland." Mull that over for self-assurance.) They managed to find freedom within the hysteria – symbolized by the famous fast-motion cutup romp in an empty field to the ironic strains of Can't Buy Me Love. They got very good at it; under extreme pressures in mid-career they crafted their best batch of songs (among them: Help!, Michelle, The Word, Rain, Ticket to Ride, In My Life, Norwegian Wood, Nowhere Man, You've Got to Hide Your Love Away, Here, There and Everywhere).

> **"How did you find America?" the Beatles were asked. "Turn left at Greenland."**

Conversely, their post-touring period saw them often flail at internal pressures; they suddenly had a lot of time on their hands. The counterculture they inspired became bigger than the Beatles, and they seemed to rely on their press-clippings as icons (how else to explain such bloated tripe as All You Need is Love, Hey Jude and the Long and Winding Road?). Paul McCartney felt compelled to one-up Brian Wilson's Beach Boys masterpiece Pet Sounds with Sgt. Pepper. That's not much of a reason to make music, and the emptiness echoes loudly in the film-flam "art-rock" smorgasbord that, I think, was their Waterloo. The split-second kinetic energy and combustive creativity that typified A Hard Day's Night is missing in their latter-day oeuvre. Perhaps they had too much time to toke up and ruminate. They tried to paper over their internal fissures with concepts that came across as patchwork; the flashy filigree of the Abbey Road "suite" can't disguise the vapid nature of its songs, weirdly out of touch with contemporary realities other musical acts were dealing with.

(Ironically, Sgt. Pepper was immediately preceded by Strawberry Fields Forever and Penny Lane, probably the greatest double-sided single ever; the latter, magisterial storytelling and scene-setting, is clearly McCartney's best song. And the album did yield A Day In the Life, one of the great 20th-century works in any genre.)

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REVIEW

Beatles: Montrealers scream for more

Here is the review that first appeared in The Gazette on Aug. 15, 1964, under the headline: Beatles Witty on Screen in Their Merseyside Way.

GARY McCARTHY
The Gazette

Marx Brothers, move over. The Beatles are just as hairy. Maybe not as funny, but every bit as hairy.

But the Beatles, stars of their first motion picture, A Hard Day's Night, are witty in their own slapstick, Merseyside way.

The film is a fictional account of 36 hectic hours in the life of the popular quartet from Liverpool.

The movie opens with three members of the Beatles – John Lennon, George Harrison and Ringo Starr – being chased down the streets of London by some 300 teenagers while on their way to a train station.

Paul McCartney, the fourth member of the group, is seen sitting on a bench in the station and is not recognized by the fans as he is disguised with a beard and reading a newspaper.

The film ends with the Beatles doing a television performance which gives out enough of the Liverpool sound to satisfy any normal Beatles fan.

But not Montreal fans. They kept screaming for more, more, more. Yeah, yeah, yeah!

Judging from the continuous screams of more than 2,000 teenagers who packed the Capitol Theatre at the film's preview showing here, it would appear that Paul and Ringo are the most popular of the quartet, even though George and John gave good performances.

Also playing his part well is British TV star Wilfred Brambell, who plays Paul's grandfather.

His zany antics in the film give the Beatles just as rough a time as the screaming fans do.

The humour is corn, but when the Beatles deliver their lines, they somehow come out funny. Example:

In one part of the film, Ringo is approached by a girl who asks him if he is a "mod" or a "rocker."

"No, I'm a mocker," he replies.

Then, pointing to the collar on his jacket, she asks:

"What do you call that collar?"

"A collar," he says.

Well, when Ringo said it, it sounded funny. (There's always something lost in the translation.)

All in all, it is a good film, a typical rock'n'roll film, but a good film.

Ex-Centris boss takes over Cinéma du Parc

BRENDAN KELLY
The Gazette

Software whiz and indie-film booster Daniel Langlois is expanding his art-house operations by taking over Cinéma du Parc, giving Langlois a dominant position in Montreal's independent-film milieu.

Langlois is founder and president of Ex-Centris, the popular alternative-film venue on St. Laurent Blvd., and is also head of the Montreal International Festival of New Cinema and New Media.

He is the founder of Softimage, one of the world's leading creators of software for big-screen special effects. Langlois has been named president and general manager of the three-screen Cinéma du Parc, with former president Don Lobel remaining at the Park Ave. repertory theatre as chief programmer. The venue remains a non-profit corporation with a board of directors, with the corporation now managed by Langlois.

> **"The partnership between Ex-Centris and Cinéma du Parc is a natural one."**

Next year, a joint program for Cinéma du Parc and Ex-Centris will be established, though Lobel said yesterday that Cinéma du Parc's programming will not change radically.

The Parc's three halls will also be used during the New Cinema festival, beginning with next fall's edition. Langlois has promised to undertake major renovations at Cinéma du Parc, including installation of state-of-the-art projection equipment, screens and seats. There is a good chance the Parc's ticket prices will rise after the renovations. The regular ticket price at Cinéma du Parc is $6.75.

"This is great news for the city's cinephiles because it ensures the long-term survival of the Parc, and it will bring the cinema into the 21st century on a technical and comfort level," Lobel said.

One reason Langlois was interested in Cinéma du Parc was because of the popularity of Ex-Centris.

"The public's positive reaction and the success of Ex-Centris have encouraged me to pursue my desire to develop high-quality sites for independent and repertory cinema," he said. "The partnership between Ex-Centris and Cinéma du Parc is a natural one, which will complement and enrich the cinematographic vision already established at Ex-Centris."

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